Book Reviews

Psychosocial Disorders in Young People: Time Trends and their Causes

Edited by Michael Rutter and David J. Smith
John Wiley, Chichester, 1995 (ISBN 0-471-95054-8)

In 1990 the Academia, an association of scholars encompassing the whole of Europe, founded a study group to answer the question of whether psychosocial disorders in the young have changed in frequency in this century, and to clarify causal explanations if changes were indeed observed. The study group was chaired by Professor Sir Michael Rutter and represented a collaborative enterprise aiming to collect information on cross-national time trends in certain psychosocial disorders, to clarify measurement questions and to compare these with respect to time period and country. Authorities of several European countries and the USA were asked to cover the selected subjects. The developing chapters were reviewed by academic referees and commented on by the study-group members, so that each chapter expresses the view of the entire study group.

The psychosocial disorders studied are crime, suicide and suicidal behaviour, depression, eating disorders, anorexia nervosa and bulimia, and abuse of alcohol and psychoactive drugs. The age group analysed was 12–26 years old; but nevertheless each disorder was viewed in the context of the entire life span. The social and economic aspect underlying the time trends encompassed the changing pattern of adolescence, increase in life expectancy, economic growth and improvement in the standard of living in this century, improvements in several conditions of living, the level of unemployment, the destabilization of the family as a unit, the increase in employment of mothers, the development of mass media, international migration, changes in moral concepts and values.

The first part of the book describes objectives and methods, Part II encompasses changing conditions and individual development, Part III the target disorders, Part IV the conclusions.

In the chapter 'Individual Development and Social change', G. U. Caprara and M. Rutter conclude that many difficulties are involved in the examination of social change in secular trends in psychosocial disorder in young people. Very prudently, they nevertheless stress the merits which a study of the effects of social change on individual development may provide. Part II starts off with a chapter on 'Patterns of Development during Adolescence' by N. Leffert and A. C. Petersen. The latter also mention the difficulties involved in the task of writing this chapter, but nevertheless give the following conclusions: the periods of adolescence and early adulthood are different from childhood and later adulthood, being ages of particular susceptibility to societal influences, in the areas of work career, sexuality and marriage, and the effects of parental divorce and remarriage. The period of

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adolescence has changed over the last 50 years. The average age of puberty has fallen, the ages of completing education and of marriage have risen. Parental divorce and remarriage, as well as crime victimization have become more frequent. Today's adolescents must make more decisions than the adolescents of previous time periods. In the chapter 'Changing Family Patterns in Western Europe: Opportunity and Risk Factors for Adolescent Development' L. E. Hess mentions ethnicity, family size, and socioeconomic status as factors influencing an adolescent's development via psychological alterations and family function. Marriage dissolutions and reorganization are stressed as variables of great importance in causing short- and long-term difficulties for the adolescent. The secular trends in family structure in Northern Europe set the pace for changes for Western and Southern Europe. In 'Living Conditions in the Twentieth Century', D. J. Smith mentions the great increase in population and life expectancy in the more advanced countries, the flow of immigrants since the Second World War, the total output, expenditure or consumption in the OECD countries, the uneven rate of growth, with slow growth from 1913–1950 and the golden age of 1950–1973, the decline of agriculture and increase in industry and services, and the increase in the average years of education. These developments provide an opportunity for testing the relationship between economic growth and social problems. For adolescents, the transition to adulthood has become less synchronized, they reach adult status in some areas and not in others, which renders them more vulnerable in their development. The multifaceted changes of the 20th century provide a field for studying the relationships between economic changes and psychosocial problems in the adolescent. The difficulty is in separating the change-complex into individual changes in order to assess their effects. In his chapter 'Media and Problem Behaviors in Young People', E. Wartella concludes that mass media very likely encode, maintain and evoke violent ideas, thoughts and behavioural scripts which are later acted out—media violence not being the cause of the aggression in adolescents, but a likely contributory factor. For the other target disorders studied in this book, the paucity of research precludes conclusions. In his chapter on 'Values, Morals and Modernity: the Values, Constraints and Norms of European Youth', D. Halpern argues that a reduction in the validity of norms, values and constraints at the informal, individual level has occurred, exemplified by increasing individualism, whereas in the legal sphere, in health, education and welfare, norms and standards have increased. Both developments are intricately interrelated.

Part III starts off with 'Youth Crime Conduct Disorders: Trends, Patterns and Causal Explanations' by D. Smith. He shows that it is very difficult to explain the increase in crime committed by adolescents since World War II. The declines in formal control, in social bonding, in family functioning and in cohesion of local communities are developments related to the increase of crime. Not among the contributing factors are unemployment, economic growth, demographic changes, increasing urbanization, rate of detection and conviction of crime. Crime reduction policy should aim at improving family function, school socialization, and informal social control. In 'Secular Trends in Substance Use: Concepts and Data on the

Impact of Social Change on Alcohol and Drug Abuse', R. K. Silbereisen, L. Robins and M. Rutter conclude that a very substantial increase in alcohol and drug use and abuse could be observed in 1950 to 1980 in Europe and North America, and a slight decrease in the last decade in North America. Explanations for these changes are complex and difficult to sort out. Relevant factors include urbanization, weakening of the control by family, neighbourhood and church over the adolescents, disrespect for authority and postponement of the formation of a family, increase in disposable income and of leisure time. Decreases seem to be mainly due to changes in social policy.

'Depressive disorders: Time Trends and Possible Explanatory Mechanisms', by E. Fombonne concludes that depressive disorders in adolescents have probably become more frequent, with males contributing more to the augmentation. The studies on which this assumption is based have limitations, and do not permit conclusions to be drawn with respect to causality. Future research should permit the comparison of rates over time, as well as assessment and change of the factors believed to increase the risk for the development of depressive disorders. According to 'Eating Disorders: Time Trends and Possible Explanatory Mechanisms', also by E. Fombonne, it remains an open question whether eating disorders have increased over the last few decades. Bulimia became a disease entity in the early 1980s, and the time span is too short to define time trends. Anorexia nervosa occurs at an earlier age than bulimia nervosa. Both are observed in economically higher strata in affluent western industrialized countries. Genetic factors, perhaps changes in infant-feeding patterns, family characteristics, the number of mothers adhering to weight-losing diets, and the importance mass media attribute to slimness probably contribute to the target eating disorders, but research evidence is limited. Future research might study immigrant families in industrialized countries over several generations, girls on training programmes stressing slimness, individual boys, in whom anorexia nervosa is rare, and early developmental precursors. 'Suicide and Suicidal Behavior among Adolescents' by R. F. W. Diekstra, C. W. M. Kienhorst and E. J. de Wilde, finds that in most European countries, suicides have clearly increased in young males and, to a lesser degree, probably also in young females, with a growing difference between the sexes. Trends in suicidal behaviour are less evident. Explanations for these trends are vague; in future, research should concentrate on the contribution of depression, the use of alcohol and drugs, the role of suicidal models in mass media and family, the changes in family structures and in the timetable of puberty and adolescence.

Part IV summarizes the 'Time Trends in Psychosocial Disorders in Youth' (D. Smith and M. Rutter) and the 'Causal Explanations of Time Trends in Psychosocial Disorders in Youth' (M. Rutter and D. Smith).

Although this is a book with many and varied authors, the individual chapters are well coordinated in style and structure. The opinions in the studies cited by the individual authors are treated and criticized following the same pattern. The conclusions reached have been carefully weighed. The limitations of the literature consulted are carefully shown. However, the chapters are not inhibited by this, but

discuss ideas for future research projects. These suggestions offer researchers a rich trove of possibilities. Although the book is lengthy, it is easy to read. The chapters, which are well integrated as a whole, can also be read individually. The book could well become a standard as a basis for future research in the area of time trends in psychosocial disorders in youth.

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From Obscurity to Enigma. The Work of Oliver Heaviside, 1872–1891
Ido Yavetz, Birkhäuser, Basel; 1995 (ix + 334 pp) DM 118/SFr. 98
ISBN 3-7643-5180-2. Hardback

Oliver Heaviside (1850–1925) was one of the most notable eccentrics in science: 'odd' was the epithet which came to the minds of his contemporaries. At one point in his career Lord Kelvin, who respected his work, was driven to remark that Heaviside was 'a good deal off his head'. A self-educated mathematical physicist who made fundamental contributions to the foundations of electromagnetic theory and to telegraph and telephone communications, showed little interest in the scientific novelties of his period, shunned the scientific community and lived on a pittance—eccentric seems too tame a description of Heaviside's personality and career.

Dr Yavetz's fine monograph joins a number of recent studies which have begun to excavate one of the most remarkable periods in the history of physics, the late 19th century. This was the period of the establishment of 'classical' physics, of energy conservation and molecular physics, thermodynamics and statistical physics, the mechanics of the ether and, in particular, the work and influence of James Clerk Maxwell. While physicists will appreciate the import of these developments, they have been overshadowed in the popular understanding of the history of science by the Newtonian and Einsteinian periods which preceded and followed.

Heaviside occupies a curious position in these developments. He received no advanced education in physics or mathematics, and came from a humble background, although he was the nephew of a leading scientist, Sir Charles Wheatstone, who was active in one of the emergent scientific technologies of the period, telegraphy. This gave Heaviside admission into a career as a telegraphist, and sowed the seeds of his early work on the theory of electric circuits. At the time, Heaviside began his solitary study of Maxwell's fundamental treatise on the theory of electricity and magnetism, leading him to formulate 'Maxwell's equations' in the style which became established as the standard form of Maxwell's theory. Telegraphy still occupied him, and in 1887 he had a bruising conflict with the leading practitioner of the subject, Sir William Preece, over signal transmissions. Heaviside exposed Preece's muddle with relish; the biting sarcasm and verve of his literary style is one of Heaviside's more engaging characteristics. Less happy was